

[By Bill Draper](#)

The nation's top agriculture official on Wednesday announced more than \$300 million in emergency assistance to 33 states and Puerto Rico to help them recover from an unusually intense year for natural disasters across the U.S. Vermont will receive nearly \$8.7 million.

Utah and Missouri will receive the most disaster aid, together taking in \$109 million, or more than one-third of the \$308 million in aid from Department of Agriculture watershed and conservation emergency funds. Vermont rounded out the top 10 with \$8,708,250. Vermont will receive \$6.3 million for the Emergency Watershed Protection Program and \$2,325,000 for the Emergency Conservation Program. The money assists property owners whose homes and farms were damaged by Tropical Storm Irene. It also provides resources to clear log jams that threaten property and infrastructure.

The state's congressional delegation praised the release of the money.

"Tropical Storm Irene severely damaged hundreds of farms and permanently altered the landscape for countless property owners. As Vermonters work to get back on their feet, these funds will provide a much-needed boost," Rep. Peter Welch said in a written statement. Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., both praised the speed at which the USDA made the money available.

The emergency funds are part of USDA's annual budget, and money allocated from them will be used to repair and stabilize agriculture and public safety infrastructure. The federal money covers 75 percent of the cost of such repairs, and is distributed based on local agencies' applications and ability to pay the balance, according to the USDA.

Matt Herrick, spokesman to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, said states were largely approved for the amount of money requested. Applications are most often handled by local Natural Resource Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency offices.

Vilsack noted that natural disasters wreaked widespread havoc in 2011.

"There have been years that have had more intensive damage in a particular geographic area, but what's unique about last year is that virtually every part of the country was affected," Vilsack said. "It was different in every part of the country. We've not seen tornadoes as devastating as last spring. Flooding on the Missouri River, because of the longstanding nature of the flooding ... was unique. Fires in the southwest part of the country were historic in magnitude. It's been a tough year."